

__THE BOTTOM LINE__ **“THE UNIQUE CHALLENGES OF FRESHMAN YEAR”**

B-PEN's 2019 *Freshman PTO Scenario Meeting* explored some of the unique challenges BHS 9th graders commonly face, asking parents to collectively brainstorm strategies for a variety of situations they may face with their teens -- “*What do you do when your teen...?*” The evening started with a collective “ice breaker” topic on the freshman social scene before small group discussions tackled a variety of common concerns.

One major takeaway is that communicating – whenever and wherever you can – is key, clarifying family values/expectations and reinforcing support, trust, openness, and discretion. And parent-to-parent connections can make a big difference toward building community and support – “It takes a village...”

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

Freshman Social Scene and Parent Communication:

As unsupervised house parties with alcohol/marijuana, etc. ramp up, it's important for parents to connect with one another about safety and expectations, even though it is often uncomfortable. Brookline is a very diverse community with a wide range of parenting styles, but making respectful, judgment-free connections with the parents of your teens' friends will help build community and healthy social norms. The PTO urges all parents to sign up for the Family Directory through the [Membership Toolkit website](#), which will give you access to contact info for other parents --

https://bhsptobrookline.membershiptoolkit.com/?mc_cid=e141f83f2b&mc_eid=756b620fca

Give teens the resources to make good choices (i.e., facts of substance use impact on judgment, risking athletic/performing arts privileges, etc.) and consider a no-penalty face-saving code word they can text you when they're in an uncomfortable situation. (You can then call them and say, “I need you home right away.”) While your child may tell you they are the only one with a curfew or being checked up on, they are not, and these limits are important and can be a comforting backstop for dicey situations. Set reasonable ground rules/curfews and meaningful consequences for infractions. (Think about what might be appropriate curfews for senior year and back it up to freshman year -- one parent group suggested 8:30 weeknights and 10:30 weekends for freshmen.)

Also, experts urge getting to know your teen's social group – have them to **your** house, meet their parents, and help create the class norms. If you suspect risky behavior and are not comfortable reaching out to parents you don't know, contact BHS guidance counselors, who can reach out to students of concern without getting parents involved. Encourage your own child to develop relationships with at least one BHS adult – teacher, coach, club advisor—and possibly another adult relative/friend.

Learning to Navigate and Advocate

With the change to a new school and different expectations, teens often can get behind academically or have social issues, but they may be afraid to talk to a guidance counselor or teacher. Ask how you can help, guiding them to learn to self-advocate, but being there more for support than intervention. Help them determine who best to talk to and consider helping them develop a script and practice what to say. Sometimes email is easier for an initial approach, but the goal is to guide students toward ease in talking to adults by themselves. If you're really worried, it's OK for parents to reach out to Guidance counselors, who want to know if students are struggling. (<http://bhs.brookline.k12.ma.us/guidance>)

Balancing Academics (with extra curricular activities, part-time jobs, friends, family...)

Kids these days are stressed, and the topic of maintaining balance and wellness was of great interest for parents. Kids are feeling a lot of pressure at school to do well in classes and on tests. They worry about getting into and paying for college, etc., and they need a break from that worry at home. Parents are urged to back off adding to the pressurized climate of high achievement. Encourage teens to find something they are passionate about that brings them joy. Remember there are many paths to a successful life, not just getting into one specific college.

Parents suggest:

- helping their teens break down stressful periods into manageable chunks of time and work,
- focus on finding a balance between school work and social media,
- advocate for getting teacher help if needed.

Social Media/ Time Management

Many kids are on devices nearly constantly, affecting mental health and school responsibilities. For some teens, it's very effective to let them take ownership of managing screen time and distractions so they can figure out good habits for themselves. Rather than dictating rules and limits, try discussing ideas together for managing and give it a trial period. If digital distractions seem to be problematic (addiction is real!) limiting access and monitoring apps may help. Consider what works for your family. ("Unplugging" at night and no screens during Sunday family time are some simple recommended practices. Make sure *you* model balanced screen time.) If schoolwork becomes an issue, consider the root causes of device dependence and communicate with teachers, guidance, and social workers for additional support.

Mental Health

Anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues are becoming more and more common among today's teens, with social media adding a new element to the mix. Our job as parents is to keep the tension down at home and reassure teens they're going to be OK. Model and encourage positive strategies – exercise, sleep, nutrition, mindfulness, humor, creative outlets, job/volunteering, etc. In calm times, talk about ideas for dealing with the occasional periods of overwhelming stress, so you're not managing it in the moment – "When you feel like this, how can I help?" Generate possible solutions together. (For information on the signs of mental distress as well as some coping mechanisms, go to <https://www.b-pen.org/mental-health.html>)

In addition, ask your teen to identify people outside of parents that they trust enough to talk to -- BHS tries to help kids connect to at least one trusted adult in the building. The school also provides extra help blocks and promotes wellness strategies, like mindfulness. But if a child needs help, parents can reach out to the school for guidance and support. This also holds if your teen

describes mental distress in another student. If you are at all concerned for a child's safety, reach out directly to the deans or to guidance for confidential intervention.

Friends and Healthy Relationships:

Kids are undergoing a lot of social changes in freshman year as they meet different people, explore identities, and make new friends. Communicating information, values, and expectations about respectful relationships is vital. Always be a role model. If you hear or see your teen or their friends making demeaning comments (homophobic, racial, sexual, etc.) or behaving disrespectfully, address it – if not in the moment to avoid embarrassment with others, then later in private. (Consider making it personal -- “Would you say that/show that/do that in front of your grandmother?”) If your teen is not particularly social and feeling left out, encourage extra-curricular activities, clubs, and projects outside of school groups. Help facilitate opportunities with other teens. But if your teen is spending a lot of time at home, it may not be a concern, but rather that they need some extra downtime – enjoy your time with them while it lasts and make home welcoming for them. For more information, tips, and resources, go to Brookline Parent Education Network's “Healthy Relationships” page -- <https://www.b-pen.org/healthy-relationships1.html>

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June_Harris@psbma.org Karen_Campbell@psbma.org